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New fiction by Brian Schell, Kiley Jon
Clark, Robert Levin and Johanna Goldstein

A Perspective on Kill Bill

**STRAWBERRY PRESS MAGAZINE
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Check out the new look of www.strawberrypress.net online. We publish print and online fiction from all different types of authors and we are currently working on our second book publication – a collection of short fiction. We are also accepting submissions for upcoming issues of strawberry press magazine.

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Make Money Fast © 2003, Brian Schell
My Father's Unusual Mind © 2003, Kiley Jon Clark
When Pacino's Hot, I'm Hot © 2003, Robert Levin
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Volume One Issue Seven

Volume One Issue Seven welcomes in the New Year. We hope everyone enjoyed the holiday season. The holidays have made everything a little bit crazy, and while I'm a big fan of the season, it will be nice to get back to being able to focus on the press, and writing in general.

This issue features work by Brian Schell, who is new to Strawberry Press. He's written a very funny piece about something we all know something about, which is not having enough money. There is also an excerpt from a longer work by Kiley Jon Clark. It's a story about growing up in a small town, and the way children perceive adults. Kiley Jon Clark is new to Strawberry Press as well. One of our first writers, Robert Levin, has a piece in this issue, which is funny, surprising and witty. I'm glad to have Robert working with us again. Finally, there is a fiction piece by Johanna Goldstein, a talented young writer from the Washington, DC area.

I've added a perspective on Tarantino's first film in six years, *Kill Bill: Volume One*. It's a short piece, and I think it had to be. *Kill Bill* isn't a film that's easy to talk on and on about. Check it out. I'm pleased with this issue, and I hope you will be too.

Cheers,

Whit Frazier
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Bruan Schell is a writer and comedian from Long Island. He hopes to be either super rich, very famous, able to do a New York Times crossword, or ideally all three. Learn more about this freak at <http://joebrian.sohighproductions.com>

whit frazier is a writer and the founder of strawberry press magazine.

Kiley Jon Clark is the former writer of a widely read Book Review called 'Readers of Antiquity.' These reviews were of rare, hard-to-find, out of print, and ancient manuscripts. Kiley has also published many of his short stories in publications such as Seeker Magazine, Circle Magazine, Beat Magazine, among others. He currently has two unpublished novels called, 'Adama Jones: Infinity Walker,' and 'Kill the Engine.' The first novel is about a man who brings Souls back to their bodies when they have died prematurely. The second novel is a 'Cuckoo's Nest' like tour through an Institution of Mental Retardation. Kiley is working hard on his third novel entitled, 'Angels Suck!' This novel documents the lives of Angels who have become human to experience life and fulfill their fantasies of being homeless, battered, ignored, or just plain tortured by life. Kiley Clark lives with his wife and kids in San Antonio, Texas. He works at a Children's Home for needy children...and writes at night

Robert Levin is a former contributor to The Village Voice and Rolling Stone. He is also the coauthor and coeditor, respectively, of two collections of essays about rock and avant garde jazz in the '60s: "Music & Politics" and "Giants of Black Music."

Johanna Goldstein does not have a profile as yet. More info will be available on the website soon.

Make Money Fast

Brian Schell



I woke up on my day off with a feeling that many must wake up with, that I needed money. I didn't just need some money, like search under the couch money. I needed 'no working ever again' type of money. Spending decades to earn a measly wage seemed futile compared to figuring out how to make lots of money in a very short amount of time. I hopped out of my bed quickly, that is relatively quickly, in about twenty minutes when it usually takes me about an hour or two.

I smoked a few cigarettes and had a few cups of coffee watching the TV news. I grabbed a pen and paper and jotted down some ideas. I could sell some blood, semen, or internal organs. I could sell some possessions on the internet; but, I realized that I don't own anything worth more than some pocket change.

The phone rang. I answered it and my friend was on the other line. Once he heard my wonderful idea of coming up with an idea to make loads of money, he was over faster than it would take to watch the Godfather trilogy.

Once my friend arrived, we began to brainstorm. We began by realizing that many people had tried to come up with an idea to make lots and lots of cash in a very small amount of time, and we decided to try and steal their ideas. It would be easier.

"We could sell babies on the black market," my friend exclaimed.

I pondered this for a moment. "Isn't that illegal?"

My friend laughed. "Oh you silly bastard, odds are what we come up with will be illegal. The government doesn't want people making money without devoting their life's energy into it! Don't you see? Money is really the carrot dangling in front of all our faces, daring us to get up and work every morning, for the rest of our lives. If we figure out how to get that carrot, by say, cutting the string; well, that is just plain illegal and most likely immoral."

"Let's pray there is no hell," I interjected.

He smiled. "Now you get it."

I leaned back and stared at the ceiling. "Where would we get these babies?"

"I hadn't thought of that," my friend said looking concerned. "It would take too long to make them,

and stealing them, well that is difficult. You would have to take care of the baby in between stealing it and selling it. Taking care of a baby is a real bitch, and the fact is if you let it die, odds are the buyer won't want it anymore. Next idea."

"How about goldfish? Is there a black market for goldfish?"

"The crackers or the animal? No matter, both are easily attainable. How about deer? Deer aren't readily available."

"Hmm," I stalled as I tried to pretend that his idea wasn't the worst I ever heard. "How about something rare like a purple cat? I mean, it's all about supply and demand. Not to mention the costs of dyeing a cat purple."

"Dye the cat purple? I see," he interjected. "I was thinking maybe changing its DNA, but dyeing would be cheaper, so that would be good. However, I don't believe anyone wants a deer, purple cat, goldfish whether the cracker or the animal, or any of those really. Babies or nothing. I think we need to get off the selling on the black market idea."

"Unless of course, we sell drugs. We could just sell aspirin to school children and say it's LSD or some new super caffeine sugar happy pill." I couldn't help but feel a little bit cocky after proposing such an idea. I could feel my chest swell a bit.

"That sounds like a good start," my friend said staring out the window. "However, school children typically have very little money. Maybe there is some club where stupid millionaires get together in the evening and have socials. If we could get in on something like that, well, we could be millionaires ourselves by dawn."

"I bet there is no such club, but I would also bet that we could start that club! We could paste flyers for in the mall, near stores where there are no customers because their merchandise is too expensive!"

My friend stood up and paced. I could tell it made him feel smarter. Hell, it made me feel smarter just to watch.

"However," my friend said, "it takes money to make money. If we were to have this stupid millionaire club social, we would have to buy appetizers. Let me tell you right now,

millionaires, despite their IQ, they do not eat cocktail wieners, chips, and pop. We would have to buy some serious grub. I am thinking lobster flavored potato chips, ding dongs dipped in caviar, and crackers which were baked by genetically altered Bonobo monkeys."

I slumped in my chair. I muttered, "I guess we can't afford that."

My friend sat down as well. "Fuck no."

We sat for a few moments in silence. I began to mutter to myself, "Make money, make money, if only we could make money."

I sat up in a bolt. "We can make money!" I exclaimed, "I mean literally make money!"

"Not counterfitting," my friend responded, "That is really complicated."

I ran out of the room. After a minute or two, I ran back. By that time my friend was on the computer looking at porn. "Come here, take a look!" I exclaimed

He came over and sat on the couch. I showed him the book I was holding, *The Complicated and Incomprehensible, Yet Completely Complete, Guide to the Most Popular Voodoo Spells*. He tried to grab it, but I held tight. I pulled away and opened it up. I paged through it until I found the page I was looking for.

"Here we go," I read, "The Make Money spell. Let's see, do you have any chicken's blood?" He shook his head. "Do you have a silver coin?"

He reached into his pocket and removed a Sacagawea dollar coin. "How about this?"

"Great," I responded and got up to retrieve a bottle of ketchup from my kitchen. "This will do." I poured some in my hand and read more from the book.

"Is that all we need? That's easy," he said as he watched me poke the ketchup.

I began to whisper in Haitian. "Put the coin in the ketchup," I told him. He did so and I whispered more Haitian words read from the page. "Now, put the coin in your mouth."

He grimaced and put the coin in his mouth. After a moment he spit it out. "That's disgusting, what is that? Hunt's ketchup"

"Yeah, sorry," I apologized. We waited a moment. His face started to turn white.

"I don't feel so good," he said quickly as he started to vomit. At first, it was normal vomit, but then I saw a Sacagawea coin land on the floor, covered in bile. I wondered if he had swallowed the coin when I saw about five more of them come out of his mouth, I knew something else was up.

He started retching violently. About a dozen more coins came out, all slimy. "This is the worst pain I have felt in my life." I apologized as I wiped my ketchup-covered hand clean on the side of the couch and began picking up the coins. By the time he reached fifty coins, I noticed some blood on them.

"Do you think we should take you to the hospital?"

He paused his retching long enough to say, "Are you kidding me? I barely barfed enough just for the E.R. Fee!"

At about the one hundred mark, he passed out. I knew that you weren't supposed to let a person with a concussion sleep, but this was never covered in First Aid. I watched him for a few minutes. Suddenly he awoke and started running, all the while coins fell from his mouth.

I followed him until he got into the bathroom. He slammed the door and I could hear moaning and the 'cling cling' of change hitting the tiles. I heard what sounded like a child violently throwing pennies into a fountain.

"I have good news, and I have bad news," he shouted from inside. "The good news is I stopped puking these damn things. The bad news is I don't think we can or would want to flush them, nor would we want to wash them."

"How much do you think you have there?" I yelled back.

"I don't know, I never filled a toilet with Sacagawea coins and then counted them. Can I do this in the tub?"

"Sure, I guess," I answered not knowing what the hell else I should respond with. Within moments I could hear the coins hitting the porcelain of the tub. Clang, clang, clang. I had this sudden image of my friend having bells lined up where his eyes should be.

"Do you think Pepto-mismol would help," he groaned. I could tell he was in a lot of pain.

"Stick it out! Just be lucky we didn't use a penny. It would have been a hundred times worse."

"What?" He screamed, and then he really screamed, "Ahhhhhh!"

"Keep it up! We'll be rich!" I exclaimed with joy.

"How much is a new bowel? Holy shit," he yelled. I think he was crying too.

"Oh, it can't be too much," I said, not really caring. I was too busy thinking of all the strippers I could get dances from. I could just imagine slipping one of those Sacagaweas in her g-string and suddenly she screams, because those coins are kind of cold against the private area.

He came out of the bathroom looking very white, very tired, and even a touch angry. "It stopped," he sighed.

"Let's do it again!" I shrieked in delight.

"Fuck no, fuck shit no!" He said angrily.

I put my hand on his arm, "Don't worry, it's my turn. But this time, we'll use hundred dollar bills!"

"Are you crazy? I have an idea. Hold on, I need to sit down." He limped back to the living room and sat down.

I sat next to him. I asked him how he felt. He looked at me, answering my question by holding his stomach and appearing as if he might cry.

"There's a dog next door," he said. "Why don't you get that dog and we'll give him the hundred dollar bill and all that spell shit?" He had a point.

I went next door. My neighbor owned a Chihuahua. It was in his screened sun porch. I cut the screen and grabbed it.

I brought the dog back to my house. My friend was feeling better, but not by much. He asked me

if I had a hundred but I said I only had a few twenties. We taped them together and smothered them in some ketchup.

"This is how it will work," I said as I got the book of spells ready. "You hold the money in its mouth as I say the spell."

My friend nodded as he held the dog on his lap. I started whispering the spell again, but in the middle of it, my friend cut me off.

"He ate it!" He exclaimed. Sure enough the dog ate it.

I wondered aloud, "Do you think we should continue with the spell?"

"Sure, why not?" My friend watched as I continued the spell. The little mongrel walked into the corner. It began to shiver. This didn't seem too odd for it to do, being a Chihuahua; but when it exploded, that did seem pretty odd.

We winced as blood flew all over us. We looked on the floor and saw hair, blood, and coins. "What are these things," I asked picking one up.

My friend picked up one as well. "Oh shit," he muttered, "These are fucking pesos. Well, that was worthless experiment."

We cleaned up the mess and threw it all out. We never found the twenties. After a few hours of watching TV, my doorbell rang.

I opened the door to see my neighbor; he was crying. "Oh, my poor doggie, Miggie. Someone stole her! Have you seen her? I would give anything to have her back! I am offering a twenty thousand dollar award."

I said that I hadn't seen the dog and I closed the door. My friend stood there, putting on his jacket. "That's it, once there is irony involved, I go home."

I agreed with him and I went home as well. Luckily, I was already there.

My Father's Unusual Mind

Kiley Jon Clark



Everyone had something negative to say about my father. Especially, my grandmother, mom's mom, the one that lived with us. She whispered out the side of her mouth, one saluting hand pressed against the side of her nose, blocking the venom from landing on anyone, but me. Mother was spitting venom in the other ear. Grandmother only berated my father part-time. She would shoot short, hard bursts, in order to give mother time to go to work or use the restroom. Grandmother said things like, "That father of yours, he's a loafer, he is...I told your mother when she meet him, that he wasn't ever going to make any real money? You know what my relatives say about him? That he is a 'drunkard!' Just look at him, he doesn't do anything all day! He just hangs around at that old Garage, with the rest of the drunks!"

And the relatives on my father's side, they just figured that he never applied himself, and drank a little too much. But you couldn't put much stock in what they said, most of them owned dance halls or clubs, and said these things with whiskey on their breath.

As a child, I had the feeling that my father was somehow different from other fathers. I could see them all, on my way to school. They would pass me in a slow, parade of work-trucks and four-door family cars, carrying these fathers to some noble occupation. And I thought of my own father, still asleep at home, who'd still be sleeping when I got home. He'd had a hard night of drinking and needed his rest. It was apparent to me, that my father couldn't work a nine to five job, like these honorable PTA Members, not that all of them were in the PTA, but I use it as an example. A nine to five, grind-job would have killed my father, at least it would have interfered with what he called, his 'Nap-Time.' Truth be told, he slept from after midnight to about three or four in the evening. But he would never consider himself a bum, oh no, he was a salesman, and a damn good one. And people in sales...you may not of thought of this, because none of my relatives had...salesmen have to wait until people are home to sell them their product. And Dad slept until the people got home from work, then he was rested and ready to strike. He was a Carpet Salesman by trade. A carpet salesman who would always sell one or two big jobs a month. Which burned my mother's butt. It killed her that he made more off of one big sale, than she made in a whole month as a Bank Teller. And she was the one getting up at the crack of dawn and not getting home until after sundown.

And here's a guy, who drank all night, slept all day, and still deposited more in the checking account than she did. In fact, I remember my brother and I sneaking into their room one Saturday. We where looking through dad's dresser for Playboys, but what we found was money, a lot of it. My brother counted out thirty, crisp one hundred dollar bills. It was more money then we thought was in the entire world. We were busy counting it, over and over again, when dad rolled over in bed and screamed, "Put that money up! That's for materials!"

We didn't know exactly what materials were, but we figured that whiskey and gasoline had something to do with it, and ran out of the room. See, my father wasn't what you would call, "Money Motivated." For instance...people would telephone the house to buy carpet, but if dad was 'Napping,' he'd get real pissed-off and yell at us to tell them that he was dead, sick, or out of town. Dad didn't even ask us to take a name or number, just, "Screw'em! hang up!" But as mother and everyone else expected, dad went from selling one big job a month, to selling one minor job every three or four months.

To my horror, one of the jobs he sold was to my Junior High principle. And he insisted on taking me along for the ride. So, on the truck ride there, he told me, "When I ask you which carpet sample you like best, you say the green one. It's the most expensive they make, and I got a friend who can sell it to me dirt cheap." So, I found myself sitting at the dinning room table with my father, whom I was embarrassed of, and my Principle, whom I feared greatly. They went over the same six samples of carpet over and over. Finally, dad turned and dropped the question on me. My voice quivered and cracked out a high-pitched sound that meant, "Tha Greeeeen one, I...I...I like the green one!" I felt my face and ears burning red-hot. If they would have asked me another question, I would have burst out in tears, tears that wouldn't have been easily explained.

Both men laughed at my awkwardness. But my Principle, shook his head at me, and threw his hands up in he air, "Well, if the kid likes green, it's good enough for me! Green is as good as anything else! Green! Let's go with the Green, then!" And I was thinking, did my father know that this man had spent a lifetime trying to make children happy and confident, or did all salesmen know that a non-biased third party was needed to make the sale. See, the buyer wouldn't believe the

salesman, for fear of being overcharged, but a third party, say a little kid, one who shows a distinct preference, well now, the decision seems obvious!

The deal was made. They shook hands on it. And so it was. Then Dad said something that neither he nor I could ever take back. "Say, do you want to go out with us to feed the cattle? We can have a few drinks, and I'll show you the best dove hunting place in Texas?" And my Principle, still pumping my father's hand says, "You know, I think a ride in the county would do me good, let's go!" Things were getting progressively worse. And I knew, from experience, that what would happen was inevitable.

A short time later, I was sitting on my hands, beside my Principle, in my father's truck. My father had abandoned us behind the swinging doors of the liquor store. The truck engine was off, so we had no air conditioner or radio to drown out the unbearable silence. I tried to look preoccupied by breaking pecans in my fist. It failed; he wanted to know about my grades and how my science teacher and I were getting along. He wanted to know about my brother, which college he was going to, and the name of his apartment complex. But a grown man can only handle so many, "I don't know," from a kid. So, after awhile, we just sat in the awkward silence. I prayed for my father to come out and save me. It seemed to be an eternity before he came bursting out the door. He had a big, brown paper sack full of supplies. I knew what was in the bag. It would be two plastic cups, one three litter of coke, and a bottle of whiskey. It didn't matter, I was just glad to see him. As my father approached the truck, my Principle gave my knee a little shake, "Of course, you know, what happens outside of school, stays outside of school, right!" I was still shaking my head 'yes,' when my father fired up the engine and roared off.

A short ride later, they let me out to open the gate. After they drove through, I shut the gate and jumped into the back of the truck. Finally, I was free from both of them. I let out a sigh of relief, and waited for the truck to move. But it took them several minutes to get their drinks just right. It didn't matter to me, I was imagining a whole separate world that I was living in. I was a Navy Seal, on a secret mission. I was with a posse looking for Billy The Kid. And I had a vivid imagination, because I've been on a hundred rides like this before with my father. There was one

thing different though, I was usually the one in the passenger seat. But now, my Principle was getting the tired, drunken tour that I've endured countless times. I already knew the route we would take. We'd make circles around the pond, he'd point out where the doves land for water, then it was down the fence-line to inspect the wild peppers growing down there, and to finish up, he would point out each and every one of our fifty cows, and how he came about buying them. He would go into great detail about the day, time, and price per pound he paid.

It was really a twenty-minute drive around the whole place, at five miles an hour. But dad could turn it into days, weeks, and even years, as long as the whiskey held out. Fortunately, my Principle couldn't handle alcohol as well as my father. By the time we got to the twenty-third cow, my principle was puking blood out the window and pissing his pants. Dad had me open the gate, and motioned for me to get into the back again. We drove, swerving between fences all the way back to town. I was shivering cold in the back, as we drove a tire over the curb in front of the Principle's house. His wife Jan was standing on the front porch. Guess what? She was my English teacher! And Miss Jan walked out into the night in her housecoat. She came up to my father's window, and he drunkenly rolled it down. The smell of whiskey must have lifted her nostrils, because she quickly stepped back a few feet. The Principle leaned over my father, with puke breath, and yelled at his wife, "Green! We're getting green carpet! And the hell if you don't like it!" Miss Jan forced a smile, and looked at me in the back, shivering. "Paul," she says, "maybe we should give Mr. Lark a ride home, and he can get his truck tomorrow." And my father leans half his body out the window and takes her hand...and kisses it, "I thank you, my sweet, but I assure you, that I will be fine." Meanwhile, the Principle is dry heaving out his open door. Miss Jan pulls her hand away and insists, like she does in the classroom, "No Sir, I believe that I will drive you and your son home tonight, and you can get your truck tomorrow." She makes a quick hand motion for me to get into her car, and I go.

The Principle shuts the truck door, and has some man to man whispering with my father. Finally, my dad throws his hands up and says, "This is bullshit!" He jumps out and staggers around the yard for a while before he finds her car. The principle says that he is going into the house to get some sleep, in his slurred speech. Jan tells him to

get into the car, and shut up. She picks up the truck keys that my father had dropped. Now dad was leaned over in the front seat, with his arm around Miss Jan; he was talking dirty about having a three-way with her and my mom. And I was in the back seat with my Principle, who was face first against the window; he was rolled up in the fetal position.

Dad started rattling off carpet prices, the difference between good carpet and bad carpet, and other incoherent things. And I wished to the depth of my soul, that he would just pass-out. But no, he said the first thing that came to his drunken mind. He ruined some pretty funny jokes, until we pulled up in our backyard. Miss. Jan actually had to cut him off by saying, "Well, here's your house. I guess we'll see you tomorrow." Dad looked lost for a minute, and did another thing, to my horror. He grabbed her hand again and began kissing it. She pulled it away and told him how much she was looking forward to the new carpet. He said something that nobody could understand and opened the car door. Mom was on the back porch, she cut on the light, and it was too much light anyone wanted on this scene. Dad swung his legs out of the car, grabbed the windshield brace and the roof, heaved himself out, and on his feet. He looked like a huge dinosaur, dragging his ass out of a Tar Pit.

Mom stood by the driver's side window, while dad staggered toward the house, and my principle was snoring and pissing himself in the back seat. Jan and mother exchanged knowing looks. And Jan backed out. I saw the headlights for a while, and then the red taillights moving away from the house. That's when it happened. Dad stumbled on something in the yard, and fell hard. Mother and I jerked on his arms to get him up, but he was not responding. "Go get Jan! Tell her we need some help!" Mom's words hit me like a mantle, like I was the only one alive that could salvage the wreck that had been coming for years. Dad was dead, dad was drunk, who knew? Momma wanted me to catch Jan, and I ran as fast as my little legs could carry me. I cut in-between the shed and the house, knowing that she would have to stop at that intersection. And I got two taps on the car trunk before she pulled away from the stop sign. Luckily, she saw a scared little kid waving his arms in the shadows of her brake lights. She put the car in reverse, and backed up slowly.

She found me breathing hard, and unable to speak. "What happened? What's wrong?" she said, with

a puff of cigarette smoke. I felt the dashboard lights on my face as the words came in slow, gasping breaths, "My dad...Dad! My dad...he fell down in the yard! He...can't...get...up!" I'll never forget how she closed her eyes and let out a sigh. She never told me not to worry, that this is what adults deal with, or that my father would be fine...she just sighed, and put the car in reverse. I could still hear her husband in the back snoring.

Between her, my mother, and I, we got him into the house. After all the drama, we were tired, worn to the bone. Mother walked my teacher back to her car. Mom was breathing hard, and trying to explain how my father must be ill and how this had never happened before, then Miss. Jan turned around and lifted one finger. It was the same finger that shuts us up, in class. "Darling, you'll get used to it...or you'll leave him!" And that was all she said, before she disappeared into the night.

To my surprise, nothing was ever mentioned about that night, not by anyone. I had Miss. Jan's class everyday and she sent me to the Principle's office on a regular basis. But this subject was never discussed. I guess we all had the right to bear our own private crosses. And I understand now that I'm older...what is done in the darkness, doesn't have to be made known in the light. So, the days passed, and the seasons came and went, I went to school, they were happy with their carpet, dad sold other jobs, and the green planet kept it's pace around the burning star.

Now, concerning my father's usual mind. Dad dreamed of doing things like opening a grocery store out in the middle of nowhere. I mean, in a desolate, god-forsaken location. And people would come, just because they didn't believe it was really out there. Then, dad could sell them groceries and have drinks. He also wanted to raise Reindeer, and rent them out around Christmas time. Dad even came up with an idea, to run a taco stand at the local Park and Ride. I can remember him getting me up at four o'clock in the morning, to make tacos and be at the Park and Ride by six. We had a huge ice chest filled with tacos wrapped in aluminum foil. I couldn't help feeling dad's anticipation as we set everything up. We had a big sign that read, 'Two dollar tacos!' I unfolded some chairs and pulled out the ice chest. We were the only ones in the lonely parking lot. I ate three tacos and fell asleep. Dad woke me up around six forty-five. "Hey, wake up! There's two cars! Take some tacos over there and tell them that we'll be here every morning with two dollar tacos!" So, I

grabbed a hand full and scurried away with dad's dollar signs in my eyes. I walked up to an older lady getting out of her car with a cup of coffee and a doughnut. I startled her so much, that she dropped her coffee and reached for some mace. I must have looked strange in my father's camouflaged jacket from Vietnam, with a cheap hair cut and even cheaper Wal-Mart shoes. She probably thought that I was a homeless man with a knife wrapped in aluminum foil. I started explaining myself to her, trying to calm her fears. I told her that we had a taco stand here now, that we had two dollar tacos and they were very good. By that time, a man walked up behind me and said, "Is there a problem here, Mary?" I tried to explain to him that I was selling tacos for my father, but he cut me off quickly, "We don't want any damn tacos, and shame on you for scaring the hell out of this nice lady!" I made a beeline back to my chair and sat down. Dad looked at me for a second and asked, "Well, what did they say?" I shook my head and looked at the ground. They said, "We don't want any damn tacos!" Dad looked at the woman getting in the man's truck and the other cars pulling in, "They will! Oh yes, they will! Just give them time! Once they taste our tacos, we'll be catering every wedding and birthday party in the whole county!" He had me run up to at least a hundred cars that morning, but we didn't sell one taco.

When we got home about nine in the morning, he said, "Don't worry, boy. Rome wasn't built overnight. I'm going to get some sleep, you go on to school. We'll sell out tomorrow. Now, that they know us, they will expect a good taco to be there for them every morning." So, I went to school and slept through all my classes. When I got home dad was still asleep. I went to a friend's house and got home late. Dad was out. So, I went to bed and set my alarm for four o'clock. And lay down. It seemed that as soon as my head hit the pillow, the alarm was going off. I got up, put on my clothes, and went into my father's room. He was snoring something fierce, with whiskey on his breath. I shook him a couple of times, but realized that it was a lost cause, and went back to bed with my clothes on. I think my brother took the tacos to one of his beer parties. Either way, I never saw that ice chest again.

While my mother had Night Terrors, my father had these craziest dreams. I can still see his big belly in underwear and undershirt sitting on the side of his bed rubbing the sleep from his eyes, saying, "Damn, I had the craziest dream last

night!" He would always tell my brother and I about his dreams. They were always about falling from a great height and landing like a feather, learning a language that doesn't exist, or aliens coming to Earth in prehistoric times, splicing their DNA with the apes and then the apes having human babies. At least he could get some sleep. I was awake all night listening to my mother's ankles pop as she paced the floor after waking up screaming.

But the people that my father called 'friends,' were the best. You see, to the community at large, my father was still an industrious, upstanding citizen. Not so much for what he did, but for what he was: 'White.' We lived in a big house and he drove a fairly new truck. That's pretty much all you had to do to be considered an up-standing citizen in our town. Hell, when we first moved there, they had actually asked him to run for mayor. Of course, the town dodged a huge bullet by him deciding not run. It was too much responsibility for him. Plus, he found out early, what the town was all about. If dad had become mayor, we all would have been burned at the stake. But he did learn to keep his mouth shut, and be anonymous. Dad got some useful advice one night, sitting in the only bar/liquor store in town. He was gossiping with the rest of them, ragging on people in town when an elderly black man asked to speak to him in private. "I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Lark, but I think you should know something about this town. Don't ever speak no bad about people in this town. See, they're all kin to each other. It's OK for them to talk bad about their kin, but if you repeat the same things, you see yourself in a whole mess of trouble! Mr. Lark, don't you let them pull you in that trap!"

My father never forgot that sound advice, and wanted to learn more about this black man who had saved him from a lot of trouble. He started going to the bar just to see this man, and gave him rides home at night. His name was Alvin and he was the first black man that I had ever really got to know. From then on, no matter where we went, either to check the cattle or buy some carpet, Alvin was with us. By no means, was it a nigger/master relationship. My father loved Mr. Alvin's company and Alvin loved being with my father. They were bound by their love of whiskey and joking around. That is where I discovered, or naturally learned that all of us are truly equal. But I soon learned that not everyone felt the same as father and I.

We were showing some carpet samples in the giant house of a respected county judge. Dad told me that he was made fat by corruption. I didn't know what kind of food corruption was, but I promised myself that I would never eat it. Dad and I were in this huge house, with pool tables, a wet bar, and a giant TV set playing the football game. Suddenly, the judge looked up from the samples and yelled, "Hey, where the hell is that nigger you always got with you, Alvin?" My father sat up straight in his seat and looked around at all the lawyers and school board members. They had stopped what they were doing to hear dad's answer. "Uhhh...Well, he's out in the truck, he didn't feel comfortable coming in here." The judge exploded in laughter, "Get your ass out there, and get Alvin! My Goddamn house is his house, Goddamn it! That's the grassroots people who I serve, and they get me elected every year! Go get Alvin, hell, what's going on here? There ain't no reason for him to sit out there in the truck like a dog, get his black ass in here!" So, my father jumped up and ran outside. I was sitting there with everyone exchanging looks at one another, and whispering about how drunk the judge was. After a couple of minutes, Alvin and my dad walked in. I'm sure Alvin got the speech about how his presence would help sell the job. Alvin was smiling, a few piss spots on his pants, with his hat in his hand, and he sat down. And even I, as a kid, could feel the tension in the room. The judge jumped up and shook his hand vigorously. "Alvin, can I get you a drink or something to eat?" Alvin shook his head no and smiled at everyone. "Bullshit!" said the Judge, "You aren't leaving my house without a drink in your belly!" Alvin spun his hat in his hands for a minute and shyly said, "Well, if it's all the same to you boss, I'll take a Jack and Coke, heavy on the Jack." The judge threw his head back and laughed, "Sure! Sure! Mr. Todd, fix this man a Jack and Coke!" He was yelling over his shoulder at a young lawyer from a neighboring town. And this law school graduate didn't like it one bit. He shuffled nervously around, rolling his eyes at the other lawyers. And they were saying under their breath, "Fuck that, don't do it!" But he was the one who was on the spot and tried to play it off by saying, "Come on, Judge! You must be joking, I'm not fixing that nigger a drink!" Then he tried to disappear quickly into the crowd of other lawyers. The Judge's face got red and he leaped over the couch. He was moving extremely fast for a fat man. The crowd parted quickly, exposing the young lawyer. The Judge grabbed him by the throat and slammed him against the wall. His feet were dangling a foot or

two above the floor. Dad later told me that this judge had grown up hard, dirt poor, farming and ranching. You know, hauling big square bails of hay and lifting hundred pound bags of feed. Anyway, this lawyer was choking, suspended in midair. The Judge said, "You spoiled bastard, you'll fix Mr. Duncan a drink, and keep it fresh until Mr. Lark and I are finished with our business or I'll snap your neck like a twig!" The Judge let him down, and the lawyer choked and coughed all the way to the bar. He brought Alvin a drink and said, "Mr. Duncan, whenever you need a refill, you just let me know." And Alvin said, "Thank you."

And the night went on with selling carpets, playing pool, playing darts, bullshitting one another, and Alvin getting his drink filled after every sip. Alvin sat there smiling, like the fox that was hired to watch the chicken coup. The judge said, "You know why I love you Alvin, because I bet you would take a bullet for Mr. Lark! I bet you would do anything for Mr. Lark!" Alvin took a sip from his drink and nodded his head, "Almost anything, Sir!" And the whole party erupted in laughter.

On the way home, Alvin said that he would give me two pieces of advice that I could use for life, and it would only cost me a dollar. My father was watching me, so I reached into my pocket and dragged out a dollar bill. We stopped at Alvin's house, he got out and snatched my dollar. As he was slamming the door, he yelled out, "Don't ever whittle toward you, and don't ever piss in the wind."

Every time dad sent me into Alvin's shack, I knew that I would find him dead. He would be lying there in the piss soaked bed, motionless. I could shake him and shake him, but he would only revive after I said, "Alvin, dad's got some whiskey out in the truck for you! Get up!" Alvin would throw his feet over the side of the bed and scratch his head. It wouldn't take long for him to venture out into the sunlight for some liquid breakfast. I always knew that I would be the one to find him dead. And I was. It was Christmas Eve, and dad planned to go to the Super Wal-Mart to finish the holiday shopping. All we needed was Alvin. So, dad let me out, and I could see my breath in front of my face as I walked up to the shack. I pushed the screen door open, and stepped in. I went to his tiny restroom and pissed in the frozen water. My urine sat on top of a sheet of ice. I half-heartily nudged Alvin. I could plainly see

that he didn't look right, not like Alvin, more like a mannequin in some storefront window. His piss pants clung to him, frozen solid. I went out and told my father that Alvin was dead, but I said it like it was no big deal. It was the feeling of expecting something to happen for so long, that when it does happen, it's barely noticed. He told me to get in, and he drove to the nearest pay phone, and called the police, "I think there is a man dead at 306 Coldridge St. And no, I don't wish to leave my name." Dad hung up the phone, got into the truck, and we drove to Wal-Mart for last minute Christmas shopping. At the store, dad was really picky. He only got half the gifts on our list. He said that one gift a person was good enough, and we drove back to town. Before we went home, dad went by the Funeral Home and wrote them a check to cover the first payment on Alvin's funeral. The Funeral Director said, "This is the first time I've been paid, before I even knew somebody had died!" When he got back in the truck, he complained about going deeper in debt, and how crooked Funeral Homes were. Dad never attended Alvin's funeral.

Dad killed the pain of Alvin's death, by drinking more with his other friends. We often stopped by an acre of old cars, and buried automotive parts. Dad and I went there everyday after Alvin's death. We would follow the little path through the old carburetors and transmissions, until we found an old white man named Tom. He was always covered in grease and dirt. Tom lived in a small trailer behind his shop. He would fix my dad's truck for a drink of whiskey. Tom drank his whiskey out of an old tin coffee cup. But before I tell you about Tom, I want to tell you about Benny. Benny lived just up the road from Tom, and when he saw my dad's truck, he'd walked down the street to visit us.

Benny was an old Hispanic grandfather. He had no formal education. I had once written a poem on a piece of paper and handed it to Benny. He held it out before his thick glasses for a second, then handed it back, patting me on the head. "Good, Good!" he said. Later, my father pulled me off to the side, while Benny was taking a piss beside a tree. Dad bent down and looked me square in the eyes, "Benny can't read, son." Then he patted me on the head and went to fix himself a drink. He didn't give me an explanation, a scolding, or any instructions. Father knew that those few words were enough. I wasn't the type of kid who would hop up and down around Benny chirping, "Why can't you read, huh, Benny? Why can't you read?"

I can teach you to read, huh, Benny!" No, I learned my lessons hard and fast as a child. Like the time, my father was talking to one of his carpet layers. They were talking about the job they were fixing to do. I could see the man's tattoo peeking out from under a shirtsleeve. This Layer had always been very playful with me, and we had a good relationship. I wanted to see it better, so I thought nothing of just reaching up and exposing the tattoo. He jumped back like I had been stuck him with a knife. Both he and my father glared at me, as if I had just farted in church. My dad said, "Hey, you don't do that! Go wait in the truck until I'm through here! Go, get in the truck!" I was so surprised...that I didn't know what to do, except walk backwards and get in the truck.

I just sat there for about an hour, waiting for my father to come out. I spent my time replaying the scene, and wondering where I had gone wrong. Finally my dad came out, jumped in the truck, and fired up the engine. He reached over and patted me on the shoulder, "I'm sorry about that, son, but he got those tattoos in Vietnam, and he's not too proud of them!" He threw the truck in drive and we were gone. But that's how I learned things, hard and fast. And to this day, no matter how much I am tempted, I've never asked anyone to show me their 'Tatts.'

Benny had wisdom that came from the dirt, not from books. He rolled his own cigarettes and spoke in small poems that should have been written down. My father would say something about our corrupt government, Tom would quote a work poem by Walt Whitman, and Benny...Benny would shake a few rocks in his fist and say something like, "When the bear forgets how to swim, and the bird forgets how to walk, man will be something else, something that is not yet know, may have been before, but not known to us now!"

A whole book could be written about Tom. He fixed cars for whiskey and groceries. Tom was always filthy; if he walked passed me with a clean shirt on and a hair cut, I would not recognize him. Tom was an old German man. He still spoke with a heavy accent. Perhaps he was a first generation American. It was said of Tom that he had moved here from Detroit. He arrived with his wife and children. They walked by a certain piece of property. Tom spoke to the owner about buying it. And the owner agreed, payment by payment, because it was useless for farming anyway. There were too many mesquite trees on it, and the owner

figured Tom would clear it, then miss a payment and the farmer would get it back. But he didn't know Tom. They lived out there on that land for two years, collecting cans and doing odd jobs to make the payments. They cleared all the mesquite trees and the brush, and made side deals for tin and wood to build a shop. They spent their nights cooking rabbit over an open fire and sleeping in tents. Town folk came around with rent houses and spare bedrooms for them to sleep in, but Tom refused and said, "We're not a welfare case!" He took the blankets and the lumber they brought, but took everyone's name and number, promising to pay it back in full. The Lutheran Church said, 'enough was enough,' and took up a collection for the family. And Tom took their money along with everyone's name who had given a cent to the fund. They thought it was a joke when he promised to pay them back. But he kept saying that he would fix their cars for free, as soon as his Shop was built.

Once a few acres were cleared and burned, Tom could have started on a house. But he chose to start on the Shop, so he could start paying people back. So the family weathered another winter in tents, while their father tore down barns for free, to get lumber for the shop. All he wanted was the lumber, and the farmer's were more than happy to have their old barns torn down. Another local church group could take it no more. They took up three offerings, and bought Tom's family a Travel Trailer. It had running hot-water, a working toilet, and heat. They didn't consult Tom. They just showed up on the property, with a brand new Trailer. They dug water and sewer lines, and put up a meter loop for the electricity. The Church group gathered around after all their work, and brought out some Pot-Luck dishes and prayers, Tom was busy writing down their names and numbers, promising to repay them in mechanic work as soon as the Shop was complete. And they presented his wife and children with a whole wardrobe of clothes. But Tom's family didn't know how to deal with so much attention, and his wife asked him in German, "Are they helping us, or trying to embarrass us? Why do they think we have it so hard?" And Tom told her in German, "I don't know, but we take nothing for free! We are not beggars!"

Within four years Tom's Mechanic Shop was the talk of the County. Everyone within a hundred miles pushed, pulled, or hauled their cars to Tom. And he made good on his word. Half of the day was spent working on the vehicles of anyone that

had showed his family the least amount of kindness. There were those who took advantage of Tom, of course. They may have donated an old, out of date biscuit, but got their whole tractor over-hauled. Tom spent half his day working on the vehicles that belonged to the people on his list. He spent the rest of the day on paying customers, to pay the rent. His wife and three daughters were perfectly happy in their small trailer and attending public school. The children came home, eager to do their homework and help their mother. The town was primarily Hispanic, but the children were easily accepted, they were clearly poorer than the most destitute Mexican family in town. In fact, even the cruelest of kids would compliment them on the beauty of their odd, hand-made dresses. Many of the townspeople came by Tom's shop and said that their children wanted to have Tom's children over for dinner and to spend the night. And they went. And Tom would add a new name to the list.

Within eight years, Tom's family was living in a huge house in town. They were well respected, and Tom had hired three hands to help him at the shop. He and his wife drove nice cars and their cabinets were filled with food. Tom had paid everyone back, but still fixed cars for people who couldn't pay. Tom witnessed his girls growing, dating, going to Proms and going off to cheerleader camps. Tom's callused hands and the grace of God had brought them through. But, as things often do, it all changed in a heartbeat. What had taken eight years or more, if we knew the whole story, changed in an instant. Tom's wife took the girls grocery shopping. An hour later, a police car pulled up at Tom's shop, which was no big deal, because Tom did all the police mechanic work for the whole county. So, when a police car pulled up, it just meant more work. But more police cars pulled up. It was one police car at first, then two, then six, then eight. An officer that Tom knew well was suddenly standing over him. He was busy washing spark-plugs in a coffee can full gasoline. "Tom..." he said as the other police officers gathered around him. "Tom...you're family has been in an accident! We need you to come with us!" Tom was silent for a while. He just kept cleaning his spark plugs. Then he looked up, "Tell the hospital, that I can't pay them outright, but I will work on their vehicles for as long as it takes to pay the bill." The officer had tears in his eyes when he knelt down beside Tom. He put a hand on his shoulder, "Tom, you'll have to talk to the Funeral Director about that." And then the other Officers broke down and cried.

Tom rose up, washed his hands in an orange smelling soap, and went with them. Everyone in the county came out to the mass funeral. Tom shook from head to foot when his wife and baby girls were placed in the ground. That was the last time anyone saw Tom in clean clothes. He went back to work, but never returned to their house. After a couple of years, it was sold for back taxes. Tom was often seen, before daylight, changing the oil and air-filters on the Funeral Home hearses. The bill was paid in full long ago, but they wouldn't tell Tom who had all paid it. So, he did what only seemed natural.

A wealthy family in town had mailed him a letter saying that they would pay the taxes on the house, and they expected nothing in return. Tom wrote a letter back saying, "Thank you, but I can never step foot in that house again. Besides..." He wrote, "Way too many cars to pay you back. Please, everyone leave me in peace."

Tom was here now, with my father and Benny, drinking whiskey and living in the old travel trailer. These men never moved, but seemed to dance around the fire, celebrating the Sins of the World. And my dad was a part of this, like the Judaism belief that twelve people, who were once angels, carry on their shoulders all the world's suffering. But these old angels never knew why they hurt so bad, and they never spoke about it. They just were. Pulled together by the need for one another. And legend says that Indian shamans could suck the illness out of a person. Shamans were built, or wired different than the others. They could take the sickness, when others couldn't. It was no doubt, that my father was a part of a small tribe; they took on the filth, puke, shit, and heartache of the world around them. Like the Shamans of old, they stood apart from the tribe. While the others were busy with the mundane things of life, like hunting, fishing, and building shelter, the Shamans were seeking The Maker of the deer, fish, and wood.

When I got into high school, I read about the great philosophers of Rome and the questions they asked about life and death. It made no sense to me

at the time. I preferred rather to sit at the feet of the three philosophers of my time.

Too many who drove by Tom's Shop only saw two white man, who were once respected businessmen in town, being taken by the alcohol. There they were, in a junkyard, drinking corn whiskey with a greasy, welfare Mexican. Yeah, that's what people saw when they passed on by. But, that is exactly what the men wanted them to see. Unapproachfullness and disdain were their covers, their cloaks of invisibility. The fact that people didn't want to be seen with them was proof of their genius. They alienated all those without a pure heart. If you were filled with pride, vanity, judgment, or any other ego trip...their humble attire kept you at bay. They were, 'Outcasts.' And it kept the vain from seeking the wisdom that wouldn't be understood anyway. To the unenlightened, the truth was veiled as silliness or drunken ramblings. So...the three left the hunting, fishing, and the building of things to others. As for them, they were content, vocalizing or not vocalizing the Demons of Existence. What normal people feel...but quickly drowned out with the distractions of life.

Yes, my father had a bad name in our town, and we grew-up poor, but I learned a secret that is worth the world's weight in gold. And now I am a grown man, with children and responsibilities of my own. But every once in a while, when I can, I slip away. And I find myself in the office of a small, back-alley bookstore. That is where I sit and discuss the meaning of 'Pure Illumination,' with the aged bookseller. And we entertain a few weary travelers along the way. Strangers in a strange land, who've haphazardly stumbled upon 'The Great Secret,' and how well it goes down with whiskey.



PERSPECTIVES



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A bad hangover, the holidays and an impulsive decision to skip out on work all landed me at the 42nd street AMC theatres to see *Kill Bill: Volume One* yesterday afternoon, the first Tarantino flick in six years. I've been meaning to get around to seeing the film for a little while now, and I've also been meaning to do a write-up on it, so everything kind of worked out what with the hangover and all. Also, for all the time I've been in New York, I've never been to those 42nd street theatres, so that made the whole thing worth it all by itself, despite the post Christmas, late December crowds. These are gigantic theatres that resemble Opera Houses more than movie theatres, though with all their flagrant flash, they lack the quiet decadence of the Opera House.

Kill Bill, in the same way, is a film that is more about its own flash and flair than it is about anything else. In fact, it's fair enough to say that *Kill Bill* is a film that's about nothing but the fact that it's a technically brilliant film. On the surface, of course, it's about revenge. Probably Tarantino's strongest opening to date, the film begins with a black and white scene of Uma Thurman's blood covered face, while Bill, who at this point we see nothing of save his boots, finishes the job he's apparently already started. Uma Thurman, aka Black Mamba, aka The Bride, manages to survive, and comes back four years later, bloody angel of death, I guess, to kill off the members of her old crew (Bill's crew) that had her killed.

The betrayal/ revenge/ murder theme works well in the film, because it has just enough momentum to keep a story that really has no story, moving. There's no depth to these characters, there is very little emotional attachment and there is definitely no moral or theme to talk about. There is just great filmmaking. Which raises the question, what exactly is great filmmaking? The dialogue, typically Tarantino deadpan, is at it's worst here. Kudos to the actors for even making some of these lines work. The writing is terrible. A little bit less in quality than the average movie you see on the UPN Network on a lazy Saturday afternoon. The action is over the top and ridiculous. Despite all of this though, the film stays entertaining, engrossing, and strangely inspiring. How the hell does that work?

The answer lies in Tarantino's technical ability. Technically, in this film, Tarantino is at the top of his game, mixing black and white film with a sequence in Japanese anime, with slow motion,

with silhouetting, with over the top violence. Not only does he employ all these pop culture devices, but he employs them so well, he makes them look beautiful, exciting and engrossing all at the same time. The different devices he uses aren't used for any other reason than just to use them, use them well, and reference other films. The cinematography mixes with the soundtrack, and the result is a grotesque ballet.

The question is still up there, though, as to whether this does or doesn't make great filmmaking. Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* was a beautiful film, devoid of any kind of hip flash or flair, and is also a story with heart, depth and wisdom. In fact, each work of Kurosawa's only helps to deepen the unique vision that Kurosawa wanted to develop, and this was a vision that came from the heart. For me, the best art is always something that has some kind of emotional connection to the artist, that from there can be understood by and given to an audience. Where can we find anything remotely close to that in *Kill Bill*? It's more like a slick, over produced ego-boosting act of onanism by Quentin Tarantino.

First off, let me say that just about a week or so ago I saw Brian de Palma's *Scarface* again. *Scarface*, as I remembered it, wasn't really all that good a movie. Sure it had a cult following, and sure, there were those one liners that everyone always liked to go back to, like "*I'll bury you cackaroaches!*" or "*Say hello to my little friend!*" but really, the characters had only two dimensions, the dialogue was way over the top, and if the dialogue was over the top, I really don't know how to express what the action was like. But watching the film again, I kind of saw something in it, or, I saw something in Pacino's character that made the film one that I could connect to. After all, at the heart of it, it's just the story of a guy who brings himself up from a nobody, develops his empire, and because of his own character flaws, eventually falls. Pacino plays a great tragic hero who inspires members of the audience like few movies with two-dimensional characters have the ability to do.

In the same way, Uma Thurman struck me as doing the same thing in *Kill Bill*. We don't need dimensions to Thurman's character, because the movie is about revenge more than it's about this particular person, and it's about a powerless person empowering themselves simply because there isn't any other choice. Tarantino gives no explanation as to why the Bride seems to be the

baddest member of Bill's Assassination Squad. Is it because she always was, is it because she's focused, is it just because she's the most pissed off? It doesn't really matter. She is because there's no other choice. And that works. Uma Thurman makes it work in the same way that Pacino makes *Scarface* work. Substitute the actor, even with another very good actor, and you might not have a film worth watching at all. In fact, in *Kill Bill*, the whole casting is wonderful. And for the most part, the real players in the film are strong women, from Uma Thurman to Lucy Liu to GoGo, a seventeen year old lunatic in a catholic uniform who manages to be sexy, sick and likeable all at the same time.

Tarantino is the kind of director where every work he creates will be ruthlessly compared with everything else he's ever done, and that's certainly been the case with *Kill Bill*. Growing up, we used to feel like Tarantino was one of the hottest new directors out there, and the films *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* were undeniable classics. It was fair to argue which was the better picture, everyone had an opinion, but it was pretty much agreed on both were in the upper echelon of filmmaking. Looking back I kind of wonder why we felt that way. I haven't seen either film in a long time, but I think we latched onto the use of pop-culture, the modernist technique of non-linear storytelling, and then just great filmmaking. The dialogue was also indispensable to those early films. But how much longer could Tarantino keep making essentially the same film over and over again? With *Jackie Brown*, it looked like he was trying to do something with more heart in it, but *Jackie Brown*, in my opinion at least, came off as a long, overdone, dry mess. Maybe that's why he disappeared for six years. Tarantino, unlike Kurosawa, may have had no vision to deepen, only a slick formula that could only be used so many times before it became trite, and his work started to look like cheap rip-offs of his earlier work.

With *Kill Bill* we still get a lot of that, especially in the dialogue. But then again, a lot of the dialogue isn't even in English, so that's no longer where Tarantino is trying to focus his audience; and it's not on the story, which is weak and predictable, save maybe a twist here and there, like at the very end of the film. The focus is on the filmmaking, the actors, and the accompanying soundtrack, with little flourishes like Lucy Liu's cellphone ring, "*Should Old Acquaintance Be*

Forgot?" making the humor come more from the film technique than from actual dialogue.

It's not an easy film to talk about. I don't think it's even meant to be talked about, really, except maybe as to whether it's brilliant or not. (**The 4th Film By Quentin Tarantino**, as it's so boldly introduced) And like a picture like *Scarface*, I think you either get into it or you don't. If you do, this film is really pretty special, if you don't you can see its merits and still think of it as essentially a bad picture. The French poet Mallarme said something in one of his letters to a friend that the language in his poetry was his revenge on a world that had treated him for the most part hostilely. As a result his poetry changed from focusing on the symbol to focusing on the actual way language and thought ricocheted off each word. The result was what has been called "poetry of sterility." There is also a sterility to Tarantino's new work – a result of the film not being about anything more than making great film to the detriment of the story and the characters. The movie feels icy, alienated, distant and unreal. But then again, maybe that's the point. As an old Klingon proverb tells us, "Revenge is a dish that is best served cold."

When Pacino's Hot, I'm Hot

Robert Levin



Blanche Dubois always depended on the kindness of strangers. Me, I've always depended on strangers thinking I'm someone else.

I'm referring, in my case anyway, to getting sex.

I know it's weird, but the assumption some women make that I'm one or another of a certain group of actors and musicians has been, from my early adulthood to what's now my middle age, how I get my pipes cleaned more or less regularly and for free.

It's also made it possible for me to have (however briefly and if you're willing to stretch the definition) an actual relationship.

I should make it clear right away that on my own terms I'm not someone you'd describe as spilling over with attractive qualities. For one thing, a future with the second towel man in a car wash certainly isn't something a lot of women lie awake at night fantasizing about. No, it's not that I'm dumb; it's a problem that I have with applying and executing. I'm not good at those things. In fact, I'm terrible at them. I think this is because I've never been comfortable with the whole business of living. There's something unnatural about it that I find unsettling and I tend to lose my concentration in the least challenging of situations. You might want to indulge a generous impulse and remind me that anyone, on a given day, can screw up the Post Office test. But when I tell you that I also failed the New York City Transit Authority's dispatcher quiz, you'll have to agree that the condition of ineptitude here does for sure have a stunning dimension.

And if my level of achievement and corresponding financial circumstances aren't enough to give a lady pause, there's my appearance. Although I'm of Greek ancestry, the figure that I cut is something less than Greek. Just under average height, more skinny than slim, and with long, usually unkempt hair hanging over my ears and forehead and down the scruff of my neck, I also have heavily lidded eyes, sunken cheeks and a pallor that's cadaverous. While we may not be talking Elephant Man, this still isn't a picture I'd want to keep in my heart-shaped locket.

But here's the thing: When I look in the mirror I see (if a likeness is to be drawn at all) Ratso Rizzo or Sonny, the pathetic loser in "*Scarecrow*." But a number of women, when they look at me, see

Dustin Hoffman or Al Pacino. Or, for that matter, Bob Dylan and Lou Reed, among others.

Typically, and on an average of once a month, I'll be in a bar, seated alone in a corner and nursing a beer when, just like that, a woman will be at my shoulder.

"I know this is rude," she will say, "but I couldn't help myself. I had to come over to tell you how mesmerizing you were in '*Godfather II*'."

Or: "'Positively Fourth Street'—it changed my life."

I realized some years later that the "strange thing" (as I came to call it) surfaced for the first time when I was only twelve. A dozen or so teenage girls were exiting a theater that was playing "*A Hard Day's Night*." As I passed by on the other side of the street, one shouted something and then three or four of them broke from the others and began to run in my direction. I can recall my sensory equipment registering a small blip that this wasn't necessarily a bad thing. But terrified by their shrieks and the predatory way they were licking their lips, my reaction was to flee.

Nine years would pass before anything remotely comparable happened again, but by then, though no less mystified by what was taking place, I was at least ready to respond more appropriately.

Two weeks after my twenty-first birthday (and just one week after my graduation from high school), I was working as a messenger and in a cab on a summer morning with a package to deliver. Heading across town we were paused at a light when an incredible creature materialized. Wire thin, without a curve or a bump in her entire torso, and all arms and legs (especially legs—in my memory, doubtless distorted by time, her skirt is hemmed at just under her chin), she had to have been seven feet tall, and I'm not even counting the fuck-me heels and tendril-like spikes of hair that, drooping just a bit at the ends and gently waving as she moved, erupted from the top of her head. Factoring in the enormous sunglasses she was wearing on an oval face, she resembled nothing so much as a giant insect.

Coming alongside the cab, she did a broad double take, exclaimed, "Holy shit, I don't believe this," and yanked the door open. The light was still red when, tucking me back into my pants, she said, "Say 'hi' to Miss Baez for me, Bobby."

(I remember that my driver was holding both sides of his head with his hands and that his eyes were popping out like cartoon eyes on springs. When we arrived at my destination he not only refused to take any money, he actually gave *ME* a roll of quarters.)

I still had no reason to regard this incident as anything more than a bizarre and isolated case of mistaken identity, until I encountered, a couple of weeks later in a bar, another woman who was under the impression I was Bob Dylan—and then another who was thoroughly persuaded that I was Al Pacino. With these events I could hardly fail to recognize the pattern that was developing.

Of course it would be awhile before I got a handle on the amazing gift I'd been handed and was able to realize something like its full potential. But in much the same way that I finally achieved respectable levels of competency in toilet procedures and at masturbating by myself, determination, practice and a willingness to learn from my mistakes paid off and I became increasingly proficient at utilizing it.

In the first of the instances I've just noted, for example, my response to the woman who approached me was to thank her for the implicit compliment and then to correct her. But when I observed that being truthful didn't just dampen her interest in me but provoked a discernible hostility—when, that is, she put her cigarette out in my drink and called me an "asshole"—I understood that denying the identity a woman assigned me was not the way to go and that I'd do well in the future to stifle the reflex to be honest.

And bearing this lesson in mind on the second occasion, I did get the girl to come back to my place.

Now before I go on I should point out that my place isn't exactly a showplace. It suits my budget, but it's in an old Lower East Side building where the facilities aren't in their conventional locations. (We're talking bathtub in the living room, toilet in the kitchen, that sort of thing.) Plus, I share the joint with several legions of cockroaches, an ever-extending family of rodents and an apparently unprecedented and aerodynamic hybrid of the two. (The biologists who've come from everywhere to investigate this phenomenon always leave with very concerned expressions on their faces.)

So as you've no doubt gathered, bringing a woman home was a really bad move. I'd go into detail about what took place when we arrived at my apartment, but since the matter is still in litigation it's probably wise to say only that (as I got it explained to me later) it was almost certainly the sudden presence of a total stranger, especially one with red hair, that precipitated the attack. (Apparently some primal imperative to protect its young had been triggered.) Okay? In my judgment it was more of a menacing and hovering thing than what you'd call an attack. But I think that's all I'd better say about it.

Despite the unpleasantness, however, this episode was an important learning experience, and when yet another woman who believed I was Al Pacino presented herself I not only made no protest but insisted that we repair to *her* place. Well, a few hours later I was cheerfully extracting my shorts from a tangled mix of hastily discarded clothing at the foot of her bed (and promising that first thing in the morning I would instruct my agent to forward a signed eight-by-ten glossy from "*Bobby Deerfield*.")

But my education was hardly completed. If, at this point, I had two basic rules to follow—never volunteer the truth about myself and never let a woman anywhere near my apartment—I would soon recognize the need for a third: Never even think about *initiating* a hook-up. I'm referring here to events that took place on an evening when, horny enough to jerk off to a postcard of the Statue of Liberty, but attracting no attention, I approached a woman and boldly introduced myself as Al Pacino. The loosened retina I sustained (and which makes everything get like very white for a second) has served to keep me mindful of just how critical to my success, not to mention my well-being, is the discipline of laying back.

Yes, I did feel a little guilty at first but I got over it.

Look, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that what I do isn't nice, that I take advantage of the women I connect with. Do you know what I want to say when I hear that? I want to say "*FUCK YOU!*"—that's what I want to say. I've given the matter a great deal of thought and I'll explain this just once. The women I attract are not what you'd call off the top shelf. Though they all qualify as women in the technical sense, are

all, that is, in possession of the crucial anatomical components (which, more often than not, are in something like a normal configuration), they are not exactly achingly beautiful, beaming with mental health or candidates for a Star Fleet Academy scholarship. In fact, and without exception, they are pretty desperate people, sick puppies and three-legged cat types. Many of them suffer horrendous hygiene problems and are also myopic to the point of posing a serious threat to themselves. They are usually very drunk as well. Given their condition the service I provide them is every bit as valuable as what they do for me.

Now don't understand me too fast—I'm not talking about providing them with sex. I'm talking about helping them satisfy another need, a need that's just as real and urgent as the need for sex. I'm talking, of course, about the need to feel special. By physically connecting to my celebrity these women can feel that they are sharing in my anointment.

But that's not all. After suffering the consequences of being truthful, and noticing over time that what questions they would ask me could, for the most part, be readily answered by any faithful viewer of "Entertainment Tonight," it gradually became clear to me that somewhere in their brains these women understood that I wasn't the luminary they were taking me for. But given how pressing was their need to rise above their abject circumstances, even for a minute (and something—whatever it was—about my physiognomy enabling them to use me to this purpose), the fact that they sort of knew they were delusional wasn't about to interfere with their pursuit of me.

So, as you can see, there's no exploiting going on here—not from my end anyway. I mean the very last thing these women wanted me to be was straight with them. On the contrary. They were counting on me to help them finesse a trick they were playing on themselves.

A trick they were playing on themselves! Get it?

Okay. I didn't mean to get vicious there, but since it's never really *me* who gets laid, I suffer a pretty large indignity myself. So I think people might find it within themselves to be, you know, a little less judgmental.

In any case, with the recognition that my role in the process was just to show up and play along, other methods of procedure I would over time

develop are fairly simple, intended only to make sure that I'm presenting myself in a way that's amenable to distortion as I can get it and then to forestall the possibility of ruining things.

My manner of dress, for example. To try and stay apace of what some half-dozen affluent and more or less fashion-conscious men might be wearing at any given time would have been out of the question even if I'd been able to afford it. And since I never know who I'll be before I venture outside, whose wardrobe would I choose? So in the summer I wear jeans and a work shirt (cleaned and pressed to be sure) and either sneakers or boots. In the winter I add a sweater and a pea coat. I might very well be the complete non-entity and total loser that I am. On the other hand I could just as easily be a Master of the Universe in a casual mode.

My demeanor is informed by the same psychology. Once a woman has established contact I try to limit my responses to those rare questions I have no answer for, to an ambiguous smile or, when I think it's best, I become silent and expressionless. Real actors will notice that, in the latter respect, I avail myself of a rudimentary device of their craft. Taking on a poker face, I let the woman read into it what her wishes and expectations dictate and require.

And, of course, no matter how agreeable the experience and melancholy the break, I always make it a point to disappear after one night.

With just one notable exception, I've scrupulously adhered to these rules and they've helped to assure me a fairly decent range of experiences.

I'm thinking now of a woman who, notwithstanding an irritating quirk that she had of blowing her nose with her hair, kept my interest by taking me through not just every position in the Kama Sutra but more than enough new ones to justify a supplementary volume. (It being Lou Reed's turn to get lucky I was serenaded all the while by her tape of my "Greatest Hits.")

I'm thinking as well of the time identical triplets, appropriately sharing the same delusion and built like middle linebackers, invited Pacino to a cluster fuck and wound up breaking two of my ribs.

It's a little off to the side, but I'm also thinking of a period that lasted several months during which I was continually approached by *men*. "I really

enjoyed your work in '*Cocks 'n' Cocks*,' they would say. And they would go on to tell me how impressed they were by the way I took "full occupation" of my "space." That sort of thing.

It was puzzling. I'd never heard of this film, or of the actor—Johnson something—they were taking me for. At first uncomfortable with their advances, it dawned on me one evening that my chances for scoring had suddenly doubled and that I'd be a fool not to take advantage of it. (I mean where's the problem? It's just friction, isn't it?) But sad to say, not much would develop for me in this area. Before anything happened these guys would erupt in fits of incapacitating laughter, get really nasty or become crestfallen and disconsolate. It turned out that they'd decided I was Johnson Johnson, a porn actor who (within his discipline) was having his fifteen minutes. Curious, I found "*Cocks 'n' Cocks*" in a theater on 42nd Street and checked him out. To my surprise there were real and striking similarities between us; many more in fact than was usually so. Unfortunately there was also one significant difference. I had barely qualified for the "Woman's Home Companion" category in the old high school joke. When Johnson Johnson used the urinal in a men's room he probably had to stand in the hall.

And then there's the "relationship" I spoke of, which was also the time I broke most all of my rules. We're going back a dozen years here, but there are still nights during which I'm abruptly awakened by the sound of my voice calling her name. When I'm not alone these outbursts cause my bedmates to awaken rather abruptly themselves, but I think at least a part of what they find disconcerting is that the name I call is "Roger"—her father wanted a boy and he hadn't taken no for an answer.

A sparrow of a girl, no more than four-foot-ten and alarmingly skinny, Roger had thick black hair that, falling over most of her face, also fell nearly to the floor. The first time I saw her, from the other end of a long and crowded bar, I thought she was a half-opened umbrella standing on its handle.

We were introduced later that evening by a casual acquaintance of mine she turned out to be with who knew nothing about me except my real name (and who was obviously trying to dump her). But when he said, and quite clearly I thought, "Roger, I'd like you to meet Pete Papadopolous," her

reply was: "Mr. *Hoffman*! What an honorary and speculated phenomination. This is *peerless* even."

Now the thing was that when I saw what was happening normal procedure in this circumstance went out the window. I think I knew immediately that Roger was a keeper and at once recognizing how much she wanted me to be Hoffman and deathly afraid that she would turn away at the slightest hint that I wasn't (which would have been difficult to tell since her hair made it all but impossible to know in which direction she was facing), I went out of way to nourish and perpetuate the "misunderstanding."

What can I say? I was in love for the only time in my life, and when, in our initial embrace a couple of hours later I must have squeezed her too hard and she urinated all over my sneakers, I just—I guess it was the intimacy of it—went over the top. Indeed, before the sun came up I had invited her to live with me and she had accepted.

"I'm so excruciated," she gushed. "I'm besides both sides of myself. And yours too!"

Yes, of course I knew there was no way it could work, that it had to end badly. But I couldn't help entertaining the fantasy that if I drew her in really tight before she discovered her error, we might achieve a depth of bonding that would make my true identity (or lack of one) irrelevant.

On the following morning, and nothing short of amazed by the calming effect her simple presence was having on my flying roommates (who'd stopped fluttering around so much and were sleeping a lot), I was more than anxious to know everything about her.

She hadn't, I quickly learned, had an easy time of it.

Her father, she said, had been a profligator of linguistics at a presticated universalment but had quit his tender position and dissipated—just, and poignantly, a day after Roger, then a toddler, had spoken her first paragraph.

No less heartbreaking, her mother, on whose insurance policy she'd been living for the last twenty years, had tragically electrified herself when she inexplicably dropped a George Foreman grill into the bath she was taking—this on the evening of the day she'd come

to Roger's first grade class to hear her recite "Mary Kept A Smallish Lamb."

But at this point (and apparently wrestling with her delusion—which was something I'd never known any of my women to do before and which, I thought, said something about the quality of her intelligence and character), she began to ask some questions of her own.

"How come you don't seem to have the majority of cash I respected?" she said. "How come you don't inhabituate in a nice place? How come you don't have a phone if Steven Spielberg and Sidney Pollack want to hand out some rings? How come your closet is only fulminating with jeans? Also, how come you don't keep your birds in cages?"

Considering that I wasn't used to such an interrogation—and that I was obliged to think on my feet—I came up with something that I thought wasn't bad.

"Honey," I said, "you've entered my life at the worst possible time and while I know that it's asking a lot, I can only hope you'll find it within yourself to bear with me. I'm afraid that I may be afflicted with what's called the 'J.D. Salinger Syndrome'. It's a condition of creative paralysis that sometimes develops in artists who have achieved a legendary stature. Owning the prospect of a fame that will survive their demise, they live in terror of losing that prospect by producing work that might be inferior to what they've already accomplished. Rather than risk tainting their image, they cease to function and, in the worst cases, to even appear in public where the possibility of a clumsy or mediocre utterance could alter and diminish the way they're perceived. What happens is that they effectively sacrifice the remainder of their lives to their immortality. I may or may not overcome this disease and I'll understand completely if it's something you want no part of. All I can say is that I'm deliberately staying out of the public eye right now and that I've cut myself off from even my closest friends and associates who, meaning well but not understanding, would only make light of my problem and encourage me to work. This unfortunately includes my accountant who happens to be the only person with access to my bank accounts. As for the apartment, it's my hideout. It's perfect as a hideout because no one would ever think to look for me in such a crummy place. You're the only one who knows about it, the only person I've trusted enough to bring to it. But

again, I'll understand if this isn't something you want to involve yourself with because it won't be a whole lot of fun and I don't know how it will end."

And it worked. Roger said nothing, but in addition to breaking out in a really hideous rash as I spoke, her chest swelled noticeably, almost expanding into something like a bosom. She must have felt five feet tall to be deemed worthy of sharing in my time of trial.

But her obvious uneasiness with the situation in which she found herself would periodically surface. A couple of days later she wanted to know why more people didn't notarize me on the street.

"Really good actors," I said, "have the ability to be anonymous when they want to be, sometimes even invisible."

I remember that when I said this it made her giggle.

But even putting aside the considerable tensions caused by my charade (and the always frazzling necessity to invent places I was going to when I left the house for the car wash every day), living with Roger was nerve-racking all by itself—like being tuned to two radio stations at once in a room with the light bulb loose in its socket. Periods of incessant chatter, for instance, would suddenly be interrupted, often in mid-sentence, by a dead silence, as though her plug had been pulled from the wall. At such times she might become motionless as well. Although her eyes would remain open I couldn't be sure if she was actually conscious. In fact, on several occasions, I'd have been ready to believe she'd expired were it not for an odd clucking sound, the origin of which I was never able to locate, and something peculiar and unattractive that she did with the muscles around her mouth.

Still, as enormous as the problems were, the moments of bliss I experienced in those first weeks more than compensated for them.

Spring was beginning and celebrating its arrival, we did the things new lovers do when spring is upon them. We went to a windswept beach where we romped and frolicked in the sand. Locked in an embrace we rolled over and over down a steep hill in Central Park. In the evenings I washed her

hair and she gleefully folded my penis into woodland animal shapes.

I'd have to say that, all things considered, life was pretty good.

Then it went bad.

Roger read in a newspaper that Hoffman was going to shoot a film somewhere in the Midwest and that he'd be on location for two weeks.

"Why didn't you push my head up?" she said, showing me the article.

Even though I'd known all along that such a development was inevitable, I was nonetheless shaken by this news. It took no small effort to collect myself sufficiently to say: "I was going to tell you, but I thought I'd wait until the last minute because I wasn't sure the part would work out and because I knew how painful a separation now will be for us. I didn't want to make you sad before I had to."

But she was happy. Clapping her hands she said, "I'm so glad to know you lastly clambered over your jaded salanjastiker hippodrome."

"Well let's not get ahead of ourselves," I said. "It could be just a fleeting thing."

Needing a place to get lost for two weeks, and with nowhere else to go, it was left for me to seek accommodations at the car wash. And the night before I left Roger helped me pack my things. When we were done she went to the kitchen and brought back a bottle of cheap champagne she'd concealed in the back of the refrigerator.

"This is a time for jubilating," she said, pulling the cork herself. Then, touching my glass with hers, she said, "Breakfast with eggs, Duster!"

As you can imagine, the following days were either bad or worse than bad. Sleeping in various vehicles in a lot adjoining the wash, I showered and did my laundry standing behind cars on the conveyor belt. And missing her terribly, the fact that I couldn't reach her because the apartment had no phone was torture for me. I could only hope that she was okay.

Finally, mercifully, the two weeks were up and I went home.

Hearing my key in the lock, Roger came to the door with one of my "birds" perched on top of her head and holding another newspaper. Without a word, she shoved the paper at me before I'd even crossed the threshold. It was open to a story about Hoffman. Some kind of budget issue had arisen and production on his film had been suspended. During the hiatus Hoffman was staying in New York. The paper had been printed on the date he arrived.

He'd been here for a *week!*

Putting the paper down I met her eyes and saw that they were red and swollen.

"Where were you?" she said. "A whole plus seven—and twenty-four as well."

When I had no quick answer she said, "You're having an exquisite triathlon, isn't it?"

You will appreciate that, as heart wrenching as her question was, my principle emotion at that moment was relief.

"Darling, Darling," I said, "No way. There's no way I would ever betray you like that. No, I'm not having an illicit liaison. How could you think such a thing? I'm playing an unhappy man and to stay in character I deprived myself of your company—for as long as I could bear it anyway. It's just a coincidence that it was exactly one week.

Roger stepped toward me and buried her face in my abdomen.

"I was scared," she said

She was trembling and so was I. We stood holding each other for a very long time.

Determined from then on to be more careful, I made a special effort to monitor what she might read, see or hear. But I couldn't cover everything. Just a few days later we were awakened by the radio alarm clock and immediately heard on a newscast that the budget problem had been resolved and that Hoffman was back on location. Fleeing to the kitchen to find something to kill myself with, I could feel Roger right behind me. I expected flying dishes. What I got was a juicy kiss.

"You didn't have to submit a misleader about being Dustin Hoffman," she said. "Why did you think you had to be duplicacious with me?"

I was stunned. Had my wildest dreams come true? Was it possible that Roger had come to love me for myself after all? I couldn't believe it. Nor could I believe the sex that was to follow.

I always knew Roger was hot when (it was her signal to me) she lay down on the bed on her stomach, raised her skirt and floated an air biscuit. But that morning's air biscuit resonates for me to this day. Indeed, it will be forever etched in my memory, not only for its remarkable housekeeping application (it worked to clear the apartment of all vermin for almost a month), but because it served to set the stage for the most incredible orgasm I've ever had.

I've never been able to faithfully describe that orgasm. If I report that before it I'd had no idea how much sheer joy there was to feel in sex, that never in my life have I known so pure an ecstasy, I don't begin to do it justice or to convey how, in the throes of it, I felt myself transported to a place beyond time and that, floating free as something like total spirit, I was privy for an instant to the deepest secrets and most puzzling mysteries of creation. (In that apocalyptic moment I actually understood, for example, why Chuck Norris was on the planet.)

And I can say this notwithstanding the fact that the orgasm was somewhat premature—I was still standing over the bed and fully clothed when it happened.

Anyway, when it was done and I lay down next to her, happily exhausted, basking in the afterglow, I was ready to drop my guard and reveal my true self to her in all its emptiness. Brushing away her hair to find her face, which took a while, I was about to speak when she said:

"You'll never assume the crush I had with you."

"?"

"I saw *'Our Picnics in Needles Park'* six times and *'Bobby Dearest'* eleven times. God, Alfredo, how I wanted to sit on your head!"

If, only minutes earlier, I'd discovered what it must feel like to win the lottery, now I knew the depths of despair. Even to think about

commencing a new deception was beyond my strength.

I didn't know what to do.

The very next day, and too weary at this point to bother checking the TV listings, the matter was taken from my hands. Pacino suddenly turned up on a live talk show we were watching. When he came on, Roger looked at me, then back at the screen and then at me again.

"How are you doing that?" she said.

When I could only throw up my hands she bolted from the room and was gone for twenty minutes. She must have lapsed into her semiconscious thing because I could hear that strange clucking sound (which was a lot louder than usual). When she returned she stood directly in front of me with her arms akimbo. (I could tell her arms were akimbo because her elbows were sticking out of her hair at precisely the same angle.)

This time she *was* pissed.

"You're haven't been Al Pacino either," she said.

"No, Honey, I haven't."

Where once Roger had contemplated me with an unabashed reverence, as though an aureole surrounded my face, now she looked at me as though I was the lowest form of nature's creepy crawly creations.

"I've known it," she said. "You're a pathoprecocious person. You're a hypothetical liar. Well, don't bother to make up something improved because it'll be too little and without much else."

"Sweetheart..."

"I mean it," she said. "I recognize the person you really are now. I expected it for days."

Yes, I was ready to say ruefully, I'm Fred the Fraud. I'm Sid the Shit. I'm Deforest the Deceiver.

"You're *Emilio Estevez*," she said. "You're Emilio Estevez and you're ashamed of yourself. *Why? Why*, Emilio? I know you aren't a word that people keep inside the house, but yesterday when my suspicionings aroused me and I said to myself, 'Roger, you're a chimp, this can't be broccoli

you're smelling', I went to a laborarium and found you in a book. It said you were a 'third-berated thespassian who didn't *always* smell the place up'. Wouldn't I co-inhabituate with Emilio Estevez? Am I so stuffed-up, or what the fuck is this?"

"Rog..."

"If only you'd had the encouragement to level yourself for me. But now.... Oh, Emilio, I could never stay with a man who has so weenie an esteement for his moral fibers. Nor I myself."

I pleaded with her not to go. I had no way to pull it off, of course, but I promised to take her backstage to meet the cast of *"Cats"*. I know she agonized over the proposition, but this lady was not without principles. Indeed, she looked at me then as though it was a few years after Watergate and I was Richard Nixon wondering aloud to Republican Party officials if they might, you know, consider nominating me again.

A few months later Roger took up with a guy she's been with ever since. I think she thinks he's Danny DeVito and I've often wondered, since they have a phone, how he handles it when Jack Nicholson and Michael Douglas never call.

And while I'm on a sour note anyway I might as well tell you of a period in which the celebrity connection women make for me actually worked to my detriment. It was when Pacino's *"Revolution"* was released—and on its heels the video. Amounting to a devastating left jab, right cross combination, these unfortunate events threatened to end my career as well as Pacino's. In fact, it got so bad for a while that even women who thought I was Gabriel Byrne would suddenly back off and decide to take a pass. It really wasn't until *"Sea of Love"* revived Pacino's popularity that I returned to full stride.

When I look back, however, it's clear to me that even during that difficult interval I was better off than I would otherwise have been and I know that I have nothing to complain about. Although I may not have put up Wilt Chamberlain-type numbers, neither has my life been bereft of carnal experiences.

Moreover, I got a woman to actually live with me and though it was very brief, that union produced a son. (Unbeknownst to us at the time, Roger was pregnant when she left me.) I haven't mentioned my son because frankly he embarrasses even me.

To say it as gently as I can, most people, when they've seen him or tried to engage him in conversation, take for granted that his parents were first cousins. But Eileen (Roger wanted a girl and she wouldn't take no for an answer) is almost a teenager now and I've noticed lately, when he comes to visit and we're out on the street, that he's begun to turn the head of more than an occasional young lady.

Here's wishing whoever they want him to be a very long run.

Enough

Johanna Goldstein



She had never owned an umbrella in her life. Never even dreamed of it, thought of it, or dared to whisper the possibility of it on a cold, empty morning. Never held newspapers above her head as words seeped through, imprinting her brow. Never clutched at a coat, feverishly dashing from one soaked doorstep to another. Never donned a hood, a cloak, a hat, or a handkerchief. And certainly never, NEVER, owned an umbrella.

"It just made me think of you."

"It's lovely." The smile froze on her face as she scrutinized the umbrella, held it at arm's length at the neck, like a snake or a bag of doggie doodie. It was an ugly looking Mary Poppins sort of thing. The kind of thing that women were made of. British women. Uptight British women. Uptight British women who owned umbrellas.

"You know me so well, Frank." She turned towards her husband and hurled the duck-headed stick onto the bed. "I just simply adore it."

That was the first time. And the only time. Up until that moment their marriage had been perfect. Frank, being of devilishly good luck, had managed never to upset his benevolent wife. He never crunched on his ice cubes when his drink was empty. He never stuck his sunglasses on the top of his head like some fraudulent "GQ" model, some leather-skinned, manicured freak. He never bought her champagne, roses, alfalfa sprouts, gummy bears, or shoe polish. He didn't whistle. He didn't sing. He didn't hum, snort, or cough. He never, in fact, seemed to get sick. Which was quite fortunate considering that she hated sick people. All of them. Yes, the relationship as a whole had been very lucky. It wasn't so much that she liked Frank as that she could tolerate him. Not one step, look, or gesture made her hands clench or her muscles cringe. He was, all in all, quite a catch.

But this THING. This ugly, upright, snot-nosed, shit blue little thing with *ooh* a real oak handle. This thing plagued her. Mocked and chided her. It was disgraceful. It called to her blithely as she rushed out the door. "*I say, Madam. Couldn't we come to some sort of an agreement?*" She shook her head violently and slammed the front door behind her with grim determination. The next afternoon it attempted to bribe her as she trotted out for her twelve o'clock arm waxing. "*I make a lovely soufflé!*" She stared it down and then, shuddering from the sheer weight of its pure evil heart, ran frantically to her car. That evening its

tactics had become a bit less subdued. "*Look toots. What's your fucking problem? I'm tryin' to be nice here, so can you cut me a break?*" It was clear that something had to be done.

She tried simply throwing it away. "Look what I found in the trash can, honey. You must have dropped it last week by accident. Good thing I found it." Frank handed her the THING like a smiling golden retriever. She thanked him with disgust.

She tried burning it that weekend while Frank was off playing miniature golf. She had just gotten a nice bonfire going in the backyard when the THING started quacking. It was squealing and wheezing, sneezing and coughing from the smoke.

"Stop that coughing!" She screamed, clasp her hands to her ears as she doubled over onto the grass. "If there's one thing I hate more than umbrellas, it's coughing umbrellas! Now stop it, before I throw you in there head first." She throttled the THING which, upon noticing her discomfort, proceeded to cough louder and raspier, rolling the phlegm around its throat with relish.

"*Whatchya gonna do now lady, huh? I can't believe you got beaten by an umbrella.*"

She staggered to her feet, and reached for the hose. "All right, that's it." She tried watering it to death, which didn't seem to work either.

"*That's for plants, stupid! I am an umbrella. Like, it's my **job** to protect people from water? Jesus, don't you know anything?*"

She scrambled into the tool shed and emerged with a cherry handled axe, wielding it desperately as it trembled in her hands.

"*Oh, right. Like that's gonna do anything. Look, if you want to chop something, you gotta do it from the top, not the side. You're gonna be hitting with the dull edge of the blade here. Wouldn't split a walnut.*"

She scurried off in frustration and returned with a gun.

"*Safety's on.*"

A bat.

"It's the metal kind."

A hammer.

"Rubber sole."

A shoe.

"Gimme a fuckin' break."

She sulked into the house trailing the gold running shoe behind her, the laces gathering twigs and dust into knots.

"You're just gonna leave me out here?! What'll Frank say?"

She let the door lock behind her, as she collapsed onto the beige, carpeted floor. She had, indeed, got beaten by an **umbrella**.

That evening she was thoroughly kind and docile, pacified by the knowledge of her eminent freedom. She poured Frank's seven o'clock tea with affection. Randomly paused behind him to fix his tie. And she even left messes around the house for him to clean up (a joy she had deprived him of for almost a month now.) But by the time dinner had been eaten, dishes left to soak and stagnate, she was ready to do the deed.

"It's supposed to rain tomorrow, honey," Frank called from behind his coffee-stained newspaper. "Good thing I got you that umbrella." He playfully knuckled her chin, and then glancing at the umbrella stand, began to frown. "Huh. Where'd it go? Did you lose it again?"

"Actually, Frank. I've been meaning to talk to about that. I don't want it."

"You don't what?"

"I don't want it. I tried burning it, and chopping it, and- I even tried watering it, but nothing-"

"You tried what?"

She folded her hands with resolve and composed herself. "Look, Frank. I'm not going to argue with you. I've made my decision and that's pretty much it. There's nothing to discuss." She handed him the papers nonchalantly, a piece of bubble gum smugly stuck to the bottom. "Oh, sorry." She

whisked the pink goo away, and popped it, effortlessly, into her mouth.

"What are these?"

"Divorce papers."

"But, why-?"

"Look, Frank, I told you. No discussion." And with that she turned firmly on her heel, marching towards the door, stopping momentarily to pull a pre-packed knapsack out of the hallway closet.

"Oh, and Frank?"

"Uh- yeah?" He stared at her in bewilderment.

"You can keep your umbrella. That little stick-faced duck is not my problem any more. Out of my hands." And with that, she was gone.

At the sound of her wheels scraping the driveway Frank sighed in relief and stretched his legs out onto the cedar coffee table in front of him.

"Finally." He whipped out the gummy bears, planted the pitch black Miami Vice sunglasses squarely on top of his head and proceeded to hum the entire score of *"La Boheme"*. He was free, at last.

True, the umbrella might have been a little bit cruel. A little extreme. A little bit much. But something had to be done. The minute he had seen her gurgling her mouthwash two months ago, he knew that things just weren't going to work. Until then she had done everything right. Everything. But that STUFF, well she just couldn't seem to get enough of it. After that first time, it was every day. And then twice a day. And then two times in the morning and two times at night. It was enough to drive a man mad. And the things it had said to him, that STUFF. Oh, granted, initially it had been polite, but after a week or two it was like, *"Hey, Mac. Wanna try a chug?"* Foul. Indiscreet. Absurd. No, it was clear that something had to be done. And, besides, he reasoned to himself, sometimes you've just got to draw the line. Sometimes enough is... *enough*.